

The poet, theologian and Christian **Malcolm Guite** has written a marvellous book, *Mariner: a voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Hodder, 2017). I got it early this week and could not put it down. Now I would like to press it upon as many friends as I can.

Coleridge (1772-1834), a brilliant poet, philosopher and spiritual teacher, wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* when he was 25, when he was working with William Wordsworth, 'strong in love!' in the exciting days of the French Revolution, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!'. They wanted a new kind of poetry, 'free, natural, lucid... drawn to discover the beautiful in what is close and everyday....but equally committed to finding in folktale, superstition and myth, emblems of our own inner nature and deeper truths of the human heart'.

Guite explores these deeper truths by taking us through the poem stanza by stanza. It never bores partly because the Rime is ruminous, and partly because Coleridge's own life, as it unfolded after he wrote the poem, turned out to march step by step with the poem. The Mariner is Ancient, his voyage is told in antique terms, but the telling came from the imagination of a young man, living in the modern world as we are. When his life is put alongside the poem it turns from being a bit of charming entertainment into a searching and redeeming word for our living today.

The Mariner and his mates sailed off with high hopes; they were blessed on their way, not least by an albatross who flew with them as they got to Cape Horn. Then, the Ancient Mariner shot him, an act of inexplicable evil, and he was cursed, his guilt - the dead albatross - hanging round his neck. All his shipmates die, cursing him; he wishes he could die, but cannot. He finds he can neither live nor pray. Then surprisingly, 'some kind saint took pity on me', so that he looked on the water-snakes which earlier had horrified him with their sliminess, and saw them shining in the soft light of the moon:

O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware...

The self-same moment I could pray,
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

This was not the end, but it was the turning point. And so, he came home, living within the compulsion to tell his story of sin and loss and of rescue and renewal, accosting people like the Wedding Guest, who misses that happy occasion, hears the whole tale, and leaves 'a sadder and a wiser man'.

Uncannily, Coleridge's poem turns out to be an illuminating commentary on his whole life, which still lay in the unknown future when the Rime was written. Coleridge was immensely gifted, full of hope and creativity at the beginning, but soon he ran into trouble. He started on opium, a common legal medical treatment then, because he suffered from rheumatic pains. He became addicted, which meant misery when he was using, misery when he was withdrawing, as he tried to do repeatedly.

He became difficult to live with; weaknesses in his character were exacerbated; despite strenuous efforts by both partners, his marriage failed. He could work furiously and successfully at projects, for a while, and then they fell apart. Instead of being carried on by ambitions befitting his gifts, he was burdened by disappointment and guilt at the failure of his life as a whole. He was a man of profound faith in God and strong Christian thoughtfulness, but in his despair, like the Mariner he could not pray.

He was difficult to help, but he had friends, old and new, who did not altogether give up on him. After over a decade of descent into the depths, a good Dr Gilman and his wife took him into their home, managed his addiction wisely until he was released from it, so that he lived fruitfully for 17 more years. Relations with his wife and children were repaired. He knew, like his Ancient Mariner, that he lived by the forgiving grace of God and not by his own achievements, however good some of them were.

In that last time, he wrote works on literature, theology and life which are still influential. He was a prophet for his time, acutely observing what was happening and pointing to the narrow but open ways to life rather than death. All through the book, Guite helps us to listen to Coleridge for ourselves today: 'Coleridge was reading and thinking for his life – and for ours'.

Three things stay with me, after my first reading. First, the picture of Christian faith that we are given by accompanying Coleridge on this voyage is unusual, orthodox, challenging and enriching, not to be missed. It is focused on God, on Christ and the Cross, on the Holy Spirit engaging with human beings, who sin, despair and come to death, where the dying God meets them and brings them to repentance and new life. This repentance for Coleridge was a lifetime of hard experience in the world, not a religious moment in church.

Secondly, Coleridge saw that the modern material and instrumental view of nature was 'utterly deadening' and would ultimately crush any notion of 'soul' or even 'person'. It meant reducing persons to things, and limiting truth to 'facts' based on empirical observation, and belittling imagination as groundless opinion. We feel the pressures today of treating the person as a brain and the brain as a computer, and are not so sure we can distinguish between a person and a robot. We are caught in systems that aim to make children employable, so that they are valued and rewarded according to their usefulness to systems. Human beings have, for long ages, been engaged in, often overwhelmed by, the dilemmas of seeking life in a world of deadly wisdoms and rationalities, like those represented by the High Priest Caiaphas, who said to the Pharisees debating what to do with Jesus: 'You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole people should not perish' (John 11.49,50).

Thirdly, Guite brings out how Coleridge speaks to the ecological crisis and guilt that is engulfing us. The Ancient Mariner brought disaster and death to the ship and all who were sailing in her, when he shot the Albatross, treating it as a mere Thing, alien to human being, to be disposed of at a whim. It was a gross failure to respect the Albatross as a fellow-creature, in the wholeness of God's creation. It was a terrible rejection of the love which is the real presence of God in all things.

He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best who loveth best,
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth *all*.

This points us beyond any environmental concern driven by worry about our survival, regardless of its cost to other creatures, including the inanimate earth. As Guite points out, the 'alls' in this stanza are significant. We need hearts purified from self-interest, to share in the love of God and to go along with it, so that we become free for all and with all.

I would like to think that what I have said will lead friends to say, I want to read this book – indeed I will read this book for myself. But I know I have not begun to do it justice – how could I in this little piece when it is a book of nearly 450 pages? Is that a fact I should have kept quiet about? Have I put some friends off: 'I would like to read it, but that is really too long for me'. Please don't say that. It is not boring, it is constantly eyeopening, informative, illuminating. It is a beautifully structured book, taking small groups of stanzas in turn, so it is easy to read a bit at a time. And it would be rewarding as a book for daily reflection and prayer – the poem has spoken deeply to Guite our contemporary, he hears it as a Christian thinker and shares with us what he has found. I wondered as I read it whether it might help some readers to begin with Part II, which takes us through the Rime, and then go to Part I, about Coleridge's life up to the writing of it. That would be feasible. But I still think the book's double act, partnering the poem step by step with Coleridge's pilgrimage has the wind of the spirit in it to carry us along.

The Wedding Guest, hastening to get to the wedding on time, tried to get away from the old crazed looking Mariner. But in the end he was not sorry that he had been compelled by the eye of the old man to stay and listen. Please don't succeed in doing what he failed to do, even if you have a wedding to be late for.

If you want to read the poem straightaway, see
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43997/the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-text-of-1834>

See Malcolm Guite's own blog about his book, including the beautiful epitaph Coleridge wrote for himself.

<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/the-ancient-mariner/>

Haddon Willmer

